



The Question Development Phase

Streamlining the Process of Writing Survey Questions

Without a doubt, the most challenging part of the survey process is the question development phase. Perhaps this is as it should be given that what is asked in a survey constitutes the heart and soul of the project. As is true with many things, getting started is half the battle. But too often with surveys, there is a tendency to set out on a path that ultimately leads to somewhere other than where one wants to go. This article is intended to provide a guide that lays out a process to aid in developing survey questions.

Surveys frequently begin with someone announcing that "we need to do a survey to find out (*insert your favorite reason*)."

Then a survey team is assembled and at the first meeting the team gathers around the conference table and proceeds to toss out question ideas. This is the "birdshot" approach. Unfortunately, when the survey has wrapped up the team will find that, like birdshot, only a few questions were on the mark while most failed to hit the target.

A much better approach involves just three steps and guarantees a more successful outcome. This systematic method begins with the development of a clear and achievable objective for conducting the survey. "Because we want to know what our customers think" or "Because we want to improve our business processes" are not well defined goals. Better survey objectives would be "To measure customer perceptions relating to service delivery" or "To solicit from customers creative and innovative ideas for process improvements."

Once a clearly defined and achievable objective has been established, the survey team is ready to take on the second step. This stage of the project involves the development of key dimension areas that flow from the survey's stated objective. Let's use the example of *measuring customer perceptions that relate to service delivery* as the study's objective. Within the service delivery component, the survey team determines that there are five crucial factors that define sound service delivery. They are:

- ♦ Understanding customer needs and requests,
- ♦ Possessing the processes/systems for meeting these needs and requests,
- ♦ Acting promptly to address customer needs and requests,
- ♦ Accomplishing and fulfilling customer needs and requests, and
- ♦ Providing appropriate customer follow-up.

These five areas serve as the survey's key dimensions where eventual questions will emerge. Notice that the survey team has already accomplished two of the three steps but has yet to develop a single survey question. That step comes next.

The survey team will work with each dimension area separately and begin to suggest ideas for questions related to that specific dimension. Using the first dimension above as an example, ideas for questions might include:

- ♦ Our willingness to listen to customers,
- ♦ Our concern for our customers' needs, desires, and goals,
- ♦ Our knowledge of our customers' businesses,
- ♦ Our ability to anticipate what our customers need, and
- ♦ Our culture for empowering our employees to "think" like our customers.

These survey question suggestions will then be refined to bring about the proper balance, structure, and formatting required to ensure a valid and reliable questionnaire.

When the call goes out to conduct a survey, it is tempting to jump right in and begin writing questions. Many surveys have been carried out without even the slightest hint of a stated purpose. The result is typically data that is not actionable. Every survey question should have a rational and compelling reason for being included. Using this three-step approach to question development offers a structured method for the most challenging part of the survey. It will simplify the creative process and ensure that the questions that need to be asked will be asked.

Survey Tip

When writing survey questions, one of the most frequent problem areas is the question that can be interpreted differently by respondents. For the findings of a survey to be meaningful, the results must be reliable. When respondents interpret questions differently, it is not possible to place any reliance in the data.

A good example is the restaurant survey that asked customers to rate whether or not the food was "hot." Some respondents interpreted hot to mean the temperature of the food, while others viewed hot as meaning spicy. The data was deleted due to the inconsistent responses.

Did you know...

As the average national gas price nears \$3 per gallon for the second time in less than a year, consumers are looking to the Internet to research alternative fuel options such as ethanol and biodiesel. According to Hitwise, an online tracking service, U.S. Internet searches for "ethanol" were up 212% for the four weeks ending May 13th versus the previous four-week period. Internet searches for "biodiesel" jumped 100% for the same time frame.

Visits to the government site FuelEconomy.com were up 115%, while consumers visited the American Coalition for Ethanol web site and the U.S. Department of Energy's Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy site at rates of 96% and 78%, respectively, above the previous reporting month.

Toyota and Honda may be among the beneficiaries of rising gas prices. The Toyota web site experienced an increase of 42% in visits, and Honda showed an increase of 19% to its site. Both manufacturers produce hybrid models which could be driving traffic to their web sites.

Source: Hitwise

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